

AN ANONYMOUS GUEST.

BY MARY ROBERTS RINEHART.

I.

WHEN Professor Phillips received his appointment as a member of the faculty of the Ocean Park summer school, he was much gratified. Moreover, his pride was largely tinctured with relief, the two summer holiday months being usually a period of financial stress. But Mrs. Phillips was less exultant.

"It's all well enough for you, William, to talk of closing the house and leaving to-morrow, but I tell you it can't be done. With all the furniture to cover, and the silver to take to the safe deposit vault in town, and the curtains to take down and put away, not to mention packing the woollens, and putting newspapers over the carpets—and it's so hard to find homes for the canary and the cat——"

Poor Mrs. Phillips subsided, breathless and incoherent, into a chair. The professor looked at her mildly over his glasses.

"I should think, Amelia," he said, "that you could close the house in a more leisurely manner and follow me a few days later. It is absolutely necessary for me to be present at the opening of the school on Thursday morning."

"And leave me to take that long journey alone? Never! With my tendency to car-sickness, too! Besides, there is Jane."

Yes, there was Jane. For thirteen years all the Phillips' arrangements had been made with reference to Jane. Guests were invited or not invited as it was Jane's day in or out; dishes that Jane disliked to cook were omitted from the daily menu; and Mrs. Phillips had been known to curtail the number of flounces on her summer gowns to save Jane's strength and temper on ironing day.

It was not strange, therefore, that at this question the professor became thoughtful. It was manifestly impossible to take Jane along, and it was equally inexpedient to discharge her. As weighed in the balance, a future containing Jane, with her abilities in the line of scrubbing brushes and well-seasoned viands, more than outweighed a summer at the seashore and a comfortless, Janeless winter thereafter. It is quite possible that the elderly couple in the cozy library

would have decided accordingly had not fate, in the shape of a telephone bell, intervened. At the imperative ring the professor rose with a sigh.

"That's Wilson, I suppose. I told him I would see if any of the neighbors wanted to rent their homes for the summer. Ruth isn't well, and he and Mrs. Wilson want to get her out of the city for the warm weather. I have been so engrossed with this other matter that I have forgotten to inquire."

But Mrs. Phillips was looking at him with eyes in which hope was rapidly dawning.

"Why, it's the very solution of the difficulty," she said eagerly. "Why not rent them this house?"

The professor had taken down the receiver.

"Yes—yes—hello, Wilson, just hold the line a minute," he said. Then, with his hand over the transmitter, "What about Jane?" he queried in a stage whisper.

"They can take Jane along with the house," Mrs. Phillips replied in a similar tone.

And that is how it happened that the following evening saw the professor and Mrs. Phillips departing down the gravelled walk for the train, Mrs. Phillips calling back directions about the canary and the water-heater as she vanished into the darkness, while Mrs. Wilson and Ruth waved farewell from the porch.

The older woman went indoors, but Ruth stood a moment in the cool night air and looked about her. On either side of the pretty suburban street were brightly lighted houses, while the sounds of cheerful voices and laughter floated to her across the smooth lawns. She listened a moment to the tuneful tinkle of a guitar, then turned with a sigh, and stepped into the house, closing the door behind her. She paused at the library door, summoning a smile. Smiles had been rather infrequent on her charming face for several months.

"You're to go to bed at once, both of you. Father, put away your pipe like a good boy. The unpacking is going to wait until morning, and besides, by the time I count ten, the electric light is going out. Now, ready—one, two, three!"

The professor rose reluctantly from

the depths of a comfortable chair and emptied his pipe carefully. Mrs. Wilson, after examining the window-locks, picked up her glasses, and, obedient to her imperious daughter's command, proceeded up-stairs, followed by her husband. Ruth stood for a moment in the hall, her hand on the electric light switch, her eyes on a

baking. Up-stairs everything was quiet and dark. Jane had just dived into the flour barrel—figuratively, of course—when the bell rang. She pulled down her sleeves tied a white apron around her expansive waist, and leisurely answered the ring.

A young man, tall and well set up,



"THE YOUNG GENTLEMAN! WHAT YOUNG GENTLEMAN?"

pale face reflected from the mirror above the hall table, and communed with herself.

"You're a sentimental, wishy-washy idiot, and I'm ashamed of you! Your complexion has gone, or nearly, and you go around sighing—ah, it's simply, utterly disgraceful!"

Which reflection did not prevent her crying herself to sleep with a photograph and a half dozen letters under her pillow—a proceeding not at all original with Ruth.

It was still quite early. Jane in the kitchen put down the almanac and prepared to set the sponge for the morning's

carrying a suit-case and a light overcoat, stood on the porch.

"Is the professor at home?" he asked.

"He's in bed," said Jane ungraciously.

"Well, don't disturb him. I wrote him that I would arrive either to-night or to-morrow morning. Just hold the screen open until I get the suit-case in. That's it, thank you. Now, which way?"

The young man's manner was magnetic, and his smile friendly and winning. Jane's ungraciousness vanished. She closed and locked the front door, and, cautioning him to step lightly, led the way to the immaculate guest-room. Then, after filling the water pitcher and

bringing a fresh supply of towels, she departed complacently to her interrupted bread-making.

II.

THE family slept late the next morning. Ruth was the first to come down, and she stood listlessly sorting over the mail, all for the Phillipses, when her father and mother entered the room. When Jane brought in the coffee urn, Mrs. Wilson commented smilingly on the fourth plate at the table, but Jane looked bewildered.

"It's for the young gentleman, ma'am," she said.

"The young gentleman!" exclaimed three simultaneous voices. "What young gentleman?"

Whereupon the dismayed Jane related the previous evening's experience, and created a small sensation.

"A burglar!" said Mrs. Wilson hysterically. "We must count the spoons at once. I'm so glad we locked our bedroom door last night. That pearl brooch that was mother's—you know, Ruth—was lying out on the dresser, and this morning's market money was in the upper drawer. Oh, I wish we had stayed in the city!"

"Nonsense, mother," said Ruth. "My door was not locked. Don't you understand? It's some guest of the Phillipses, and he doesn't know of the change that has been made. Go, please, and call him to breakfast, Jane."

But Jane came down in a few minutes to announce that the room was empty, and to place before the professor a slip of paper which had been conspicuously fastened in the corner of the mirror. Professor Wilson straightened his glasses and read it aloud:

DEAR PROFESSOR:

I am accepting, somewhat tardily, your kind invitation to make this Liberty Hall. I'm off early to watch the football practise game, and will spend the remainder of the day trying to locate a friend who has disappeared. Don't worry about my meals—I'll get them wherever I happen to be. Regards and many thanks to your good wife for her hospitality.

A.

P. S.—Mother sends her love.

"Very surprising, very," said the professor. "The signature is most indefinite. 'A' might be anything from Adam to Ananias."

But the professor's attempt at jocularity fell flat. Ruth's eyes were flashing with indignation.

"Outrageous!" she stormed. "Even if the Phillipses were here, such conduct would be insufferable!" Then, more mildly: "What does he look like, Jane?"

But Jane, thus appealed to, was not a very enlightening witness. Was he tall? Yes, very—or rather, now she thought of it, not so very. Was he dark or light? Well, she thought his hair was brown, but perhaps it was a little bit red. She knew it looked red in the hall, but of course there was a red globe on the chandelier.

Ruth's small foot tapped the floor impatiently.

"Now, father and mother, and you, too, Jane, listen to me." Ruth being an only child, her father and mother always *did* listen to what she said, but of course Jane was an unknown quantity. "It was extremely rude of this person"—there are a great many possibilities of inflection in that small word "person"—"to go away this morning without waiting to say a word to his entertainers, and he needs a good lesson. We will allow him to come and go to-day as he wishes, and Jane, you must not tell him anything. Then, when he presents himself for dinner to-night, there will be a few surprises in store for him!"

There really did not seem to be anything else to do, for the young man was beyond reach. Even Jane acquiesced, entirely forgetful of the half dollar which rested at that moment on the kitchen mantel-shelf, a mute witness to the evanescence of human gratitude. And so, after a morning spent in unpacking and an afternoon devoted to calls, the ladies hastened to dress for the eventful dinner. Both took especial pains with their toilettes, Ruth looking her best, which was very good indeed, in soft, lacy white. Jane announced dinner punctually.

"But the visitor, Jane," said Mrs. Wilson. "Hasn't that young man come back yet?"

"Oh, yes'm, I forgot to tell you. He was here this afternoon. He said his trunk must be lost, and after he took a bath he borrowed one of the professor's dress shirts, and went out for dinner. He'll be back late to-night."

"Mother," said Ruth, "this is simply disgraceful! The idea of his wearing one of father's shirts! I am not going to stand it. The first time he allows us the privilege of seeing him, I am going to tell him just what I think of him."

"Don't be rude, Ruth, I implore you. Don't say anything you will regret later."

"I can look a great deal that I might not care to say," said Ruth, and being a

young woman of spirit there is no reason to doubt that she could.

III.

THE evening was not cheerful. The professor amused himself, as was his wont, with the Greek poets. Mrs. Wilson crocheted blue bedroom slippers with pink scallops around the tops—an evening custom of hers that derived its sole variety from periodical changes in the colors employed. Ruth spent fully an hour outlining a comprehensive scheme of vengeance against the intruder upon the family peace. Then she went upstairs, took off her wasted finery, and sat down by the open window in the starlight.

Long after the house was dark and silent she sat there, dreaming of that last summer which had meant so much to her, and which now seemed as dead as its roses. The quarrel had been over such a trifle, and she had so deeply repented her hasty return home. She had thought the man would follow her, forgetting that in her anger she had told him that she had never cared for him. He had had a very proper pride of his own, and now she was suffering the punishment of the impulsive and wilful.

She rose with a sigh, and prepared for bed, her lips tightening ominously when she heard the click of a latch-key in the front door, and a firm though carefully muffled step on the stair.

She was again disappointed at breakfast. Jane reported that the young man had taken a cup of coffee half an hour before, and had started for the city.

"He's powerful anxious to find a friend that's moved away," she reported. "He says he'll settle down and visit with the family as soon as he finds him. He'll be back late to-night."

That day Ruth and her mother spent in town shopping. When they got home late in the afternoon, Jane met them at

the door with a smile. Leading the way into the library, she pointed with pride to the center table, on which a huge cluster of American beauties towered almost to the low chandelier.

"There's more in the dining-room," said Jane, breathless with importance. "He brought them!"

Mrs. Wilson was delighted, but Ruth, unable to believe any good of their uninvited guest, was suspicious.

"What did he borrow this time?" she asked.

Jane laughed.

"He was pretty mad when he found his trunk wasn't here. He got the professor's razor and shaved himself, and he nearly cut his ear off; I heard him talking about it clear downstairs. Then he borrowed a necktie and a couple of handkerchiefs out of Mr. Wilson's chiffonier. I didn't want to lend him the rain-coat, but he said: 'Great Scott, Jane, the professor won't mind. Why, he slept in my pajamas and wore my underclothes once for a week when he was visiting us and his trunk was lost!'"

"Is that all?" said Ruth ominously.

"That's all," said Jane cheerfully. "He

shaved in your room, Miss Ruth, because the light was better."

"That settles it! We are not going to allow any strange man to live in our house, wear our clothes, and make himself generally obnoxious! I don't care if he did bring those flowers, I am going to have some kind of an explanation with him. Jane, please waken me early in the morning, and I'll try to see him before he goes out."

It was quite early the next morning when Jane tapped lightly at Ruth's door.

"He's up," she whispered. "I hear him moving around. And look here, Miss Ruth, don't be too hard on him. He hasn't any idea the Phillipes aren't here. Suppose, when he rings for his shaving-water, I bring it here, and you can give it to him."



"I WISH, IF YOU HAVE THE TIME,
YOU WOULD SEW A BUTTON
ON MY COAT."

Ruth assented. She dressed hastily, and was just fastening her neck-ribbon when Jane brought the hot water and retreated to the kitchen, beyond reach of the threatening storm. Ruth picked up the pitcher, and, holding it gingerly, tapped at the spare room door. It was opened about six inches; a hand took the pitcher, and dropped a quarter into hers.

"Wait a minute, Jane," said a loud whisper. "I wish, if you have the time, you would sew a button on my coat. Here it is!" And before Ruth quite realized the situation, a coat and a button were passed to her through the aperture, and the door gently closed.

Stunned, Ruth took the offending garment to her room and contemplated it disgustingly. It was a big coat; evidently the visitor had shoulders. Also, it was a handsome specimen of the tailor's art. She might sew on the button, as he had asked; then, when she returned the garment, it would be a good time to spring the trap as she had planned, beginning with "Have you not made a mistake?" and finishing with his utter discomfiture and chagrin.

Ruth threaded a needle and picked up the coat. She must have upturned it as she did so, for out rolled a number of objects—a fountain pen, a cigar-case, a time-table, and, right at her feet, a small, flat leather case. It was palpably a photograph case, and as such was entitled to respect; but Ruth was very human, and so of course she opened it. There was a girl's picture inside, and on the back, in bold, masculine characters, was a quotation from Meredith:

How fair is her forehead, how calm seems her cheek!

And how sweet must that voice be, if once she would speak!

Ruth looked long at the little inscription. Then, putting the various articles back in the pockets, she went with the coat to the kitchen.

"I've changed my plan, Jane," she said hurriedly. "Take this coat up to him, and tell him that the professor particularly wants him to be home for dinner to-night. He is to meet a friend."

IV.

THE house looked very gay that night. There were roses in the dining-room, and pink shades on the candles, while Ruth, in her pale pink frock, putting the finishing touches to the table, looked like a rose herself. Promptly at the dinner hour the Wilson family assembled in the

library, but at the sound of a firm step descending the stairs Ruth beat a hasty retreat. As the tall, immaculate young man in evening clothes appeared in the doorway, Mrs. Wilson rose to greet him, and without noticing his evident astonishment shook hands heartily.

"And this is my husband, Mr. Wilson," she said, turning to the professor.

The professor was urbanity itself. He pushed forward a comfortable chair and a box of cigars, with an air of having known his guest for years. But the young man was plainly battling with a state of mental chaos.

"Delightful evening," said the professor cheerfully.

"Terribly so—that is, I should say, charming," he replied in an abstracted voice. What did Phillips mean, thrusting him on the other dinner guests without the formality of an introduction? Where was Phillips, anyhow?

"I haven't had the pleasure of seeing my hostess yet," he said, "strange as it may seem. I hope she is quite well?"

"Oh, very well, thank you," said Mrs. Wilson with a smile.

The young man eyed her for a moment, but she seemed unconscious of his scrutiny, and went on placidly with her embroidery. Jane at the door announced dinner, and she rose.

"Come, gentlemen," she said.

But the young man did not move. Something seemed to dawn on him all at once.

"But the Phillipses?" he said.

The professor was really enjoying himself.

"The Phillipses? Oh, they are spending the summer at Ocean Park."

A brilliant flush spread from the young man's collar to his carefully brushed hair. He looked from Mrs. Wilson to her husband, and back again to the lady.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered. "I hope I have misunderstood you. You do not mean that the Phillips family is away from home?"

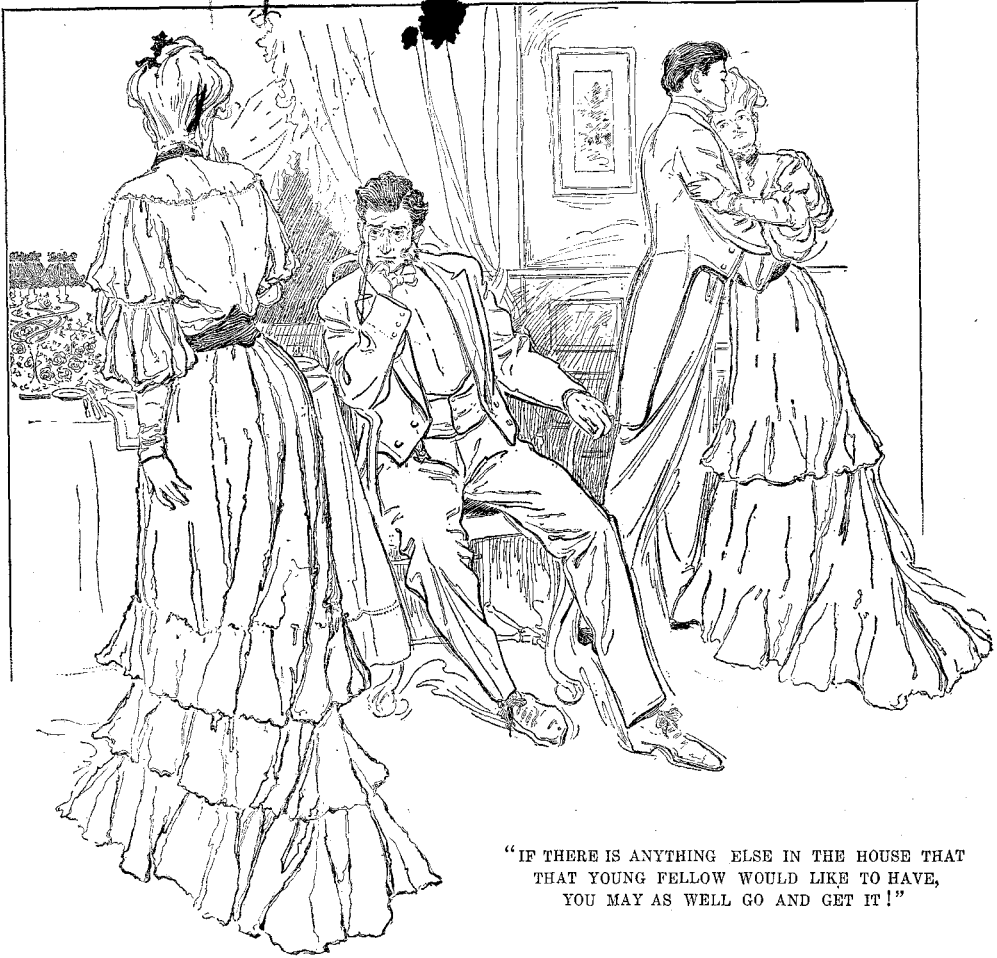
"Exactly that."

The professor was an adept at calling luckless students before him and holding them up to the ridicule of the class, but never, perhaps, had he made a query that caused quite the embarrassment that followed his next remark.

"Did the shirt fit?" he asked.

The young man hastily brought out his handkerchief and mopped his face.

"I nearly choked to death in the collar-band," he said. "My trunk had not come, and——"



"IF THERE IS ANYTHING ELSE IN THE HOUSE THAT
THAT YOUNG FELLOW WOULD LIKE TO HAVE,
YOU MAY AS WELL GO AND GET IT!"

"Dinner will be cold," said Mrs. Wilson peremptorily, and the little procession filed into the dining-room. Ruth was standing in the candle-light, and as the young man caught sight of her he stopped short. Another instant, and his arms were close about her.

"My sweetest heart!" he said. "I have been searching everywhere for you!"

The professor groped his way near-sightedly around the table and dropped into a chair.

"Maria," he said plaintively to his astonished wife, "ask Ruth to introduce us to Mr. Adam, or Ananias, or whatever his name may be. And if there is anything else in the house that that young fellow would like to have, you may as well go and get it!"